

Photospot:

Friedmann's Lark *Mirafra pulpa*

Nik Borrow

L'Alouette de Friedmann *Mirafra pulpa*. Bien que l'Alouette de Friedmann *Mirafra pulpa* ait été décrite en 1930 — par l'ornithologue américain Herbert Friedmann sur la base d'un spécimen collecté en 1912 au sud de l'Éthiopie — ce n'est que pendant les années 1970 que nos connaissances de l'espèce ont augmentées substantiellement. Elle demeure toutefois classée comme «Insuffisamment documentée». L'oiseau est d'apparence quelque peu erratique et n'est pratiquement jamais observé en dehors de la période de reproduction, en saison des pluies. Son aire de répartition s'étend de la localité type en Éthiopie du sud jusqu'à la Réserve de Mkomazi au nord de la Tanzanie, en passant par les Réserves de Samburu/Shaba et du Parc National de Tsavo au Kenya. Les critères d'identification sont présentés et illustrés par des photos, et comparés avec celles d'autres espèces d'alouettes.



Figure 1. Friedmann's Lark *Mirafra pulpa*, Shaba National Reserve, Kenya, 3 November 2008 (Nik Borrow). The drawn-out and far-carrying *hoo-ee-oo* song is usually given during song-flight or from the topmost branches of a prominent bush. Whilst singing the bright white throat is forced outwards forming a distinctive 'beard'.

Alouette de Friedmann *Mirafra pulpa*, Réserve Nationale de Shaba, Kenya, 3 novembre 2008 (Nik Borrow). Le chant étiré et portant loin *hoo-ee-oo* est d'habitude émis en vol ou à partir du sommet d'un buisson proéminent. La gorge blanche est gonflée en chantant, formant ainsi une 'barbe'.



Figure 2. Friedmann's Lark *Mirafra pulpa*, Shaba National Reserve, Kenya, 3 November 2008 (Nik Borrow). Features to look for on a silent bird include the brown centres to the median and greater coverts that are bordered by a darker submarginal line. Also, the streaks on the breast-sides tend to coalesce, giving the illusion of a dark patch.

Alouette de Friedmann *Mirafra pulpa*, Réserve Nationale de Shaba, Kenya, 3 novembre 2008 (Nik Borrow). Les caractéristiques à noter chez un oiseau silencieux comprennent les centres bruns des moyennes et grandes couvertures bordés d'une ligne sombre sub-marginale. Les stries sur les côtés de la poitrine ont aussi tendance à s'unir, donnant l'impression d'une tache sombre.

Friedmann's Lark *Mirafra pulpa* is probably one of those few birds that really deserve the often-misused adjective 'enigmatic'. The species was described in 1930 by the American ornithologist Herbert Friedmann from a specimen collected in southern Shoa Province, Ethiopia, by E. A. Mearns in May 1912 (Friedmann



Figure 3. Friedmann's Lark *Mirafra pulpa*, Tsavo East National Park, Kenya, 28 November 2009 (Axel Smets). In worn plumage the appearance is more uniform but although the pale edges have abraded to quite an extent, the brown-centred coverts with darker vane and submarginal areas can still be seen. Even when not singing this individual shows the distinctive white throat.

Alouette de Friedmann *Mirafra pulpa*, Parc National de Tsavo Est, Kenya, 28 novembre 2009 (Axel Smets). En plumage usé l'apparence est plus uniforme, mais bien que les liserés pâles soient déjà bien abrasés, les couvertures aux centres bruns et les parties plus sombres des plumes sont toujours visibles. La gorge blanche caractéristique est bien apparente, même chez cet individu silencieux.

Figure 4. Foxy Lark *Mirafra alopec*, Shaba National Reserve, Kenya, 17 May 2009 (Adam Riley / Rockjumper Birding Tours). The form that overlaps with Friedmann's Lark shows greater contrast and a much warmer tone to the plumage than the latter. Note also that in Foxy Lark the pale-fringed greater and median coverts are dark-centred and the supercilium and semicircular mark below the eye are whiter and more prominent; this effect is further heightened by the blackish lores.

Alouette abyssinienne *Mirafra alopec*, Réserve Nationale de Shaba, Kenya, 17 mai 2009 (Adam Riley / Rockjumper Birding Tours). La forme qui chevauche avec l'Alouette de Friedmann a un plumage plus contrasté, au teint beaucoup

plus chaud, que l'Alouette de Friedmann. Noter également que chez l'Alouette abyssinienne les grandes et moyennes couvertures ont un centre sombre et des liserés pâles, et que le sourcil et la marque semi-circulaire en dessous de l'œil sont plus blancs et plus prononcés ; cet effet est augmenté par les lores noirâtres.

Figure 5. Williams's Lark *Mirafra williamsi*, Shaba National Reserve, Kenya, 3 November 2008 (Nik Borrow). This lark prefers more open, rocky, lava or sandy plains, is virtually plain-backed and blotched or spotted below and not likely to be confused.

Alouette de Williams *Mirafra williamsi*, Réserve Nationale de Shaba, Kenya, 3 novembre 2008 (Nik Borrow). Cette alouette préfère les plaines plus ouvertes, rocailleuses, de lave ou sablonneuses et est pratiquement unie dessus et tacheté dessous; il est improbable qu'elle soit confondue.

Figure 6. Somali Short-toed Lark *Calandrella somalica*, Liben Plains, Ethiopia 19 October 2006 (Nik Borrow). This species has a distinctive facial pattern with obvious pale semicircular areas around the eye and a browner plumage with dark centred median and greater coverts.

Alouette roussâtre *Calandrella somalica*, Plaines de Liben, Ethiopie, 19 octobre 2006 (Nik Borrow). Cette espèce a un pattern facial distinct avec des zones pâles semi-circulaires marquées autour de l'œil et un plumage plus brun avec des grandes et moyennes couvertures aux centres sombres.

1930a). During the same expedition, three more specimens were collected from near Archer's Post in the Samburu area of northern Kenya, but these were originally described as a separate species *M. candida* (Friedmann 1930b). There were subsequently no further records until December 1972 when the ringing team at Ngulia Lodge, Tsavo West National Park, south-east Kenya, found a corpse there after the bird flew into the walls at night, having presumably been attracted to the bright lights of the lodge (Lack 1977).

During the 1970s our knowledge of the bird was much advanced, in particular by Peter Lack who described its song and field features (Lack 1977). However, the species remains elusive and somewhat erratic in its appearances to this day, and it is almost never seen outside the breeding season (see Lack 1997 for all records prior to 1997). It is still classified as 'Data Deficient' (BirdLife International 2009). In order to stand a good chance of seeing Friedmann's Lark the visiting birder must firstly visit the known range, which stretches from the type locality in southern Ethiopia, through the Samburu/Shaba Game Reserves and Tsavo National Park areas of Kenya into the Mkomazi Game Reserve in northern Tanzania. The species' preferred habitat is rather open grassland with sparse to dense bush cover. The best time to look is definitely in the rainy season, but as the rains can be erratic in this region, this is not something that can be easily planned several months in advance. However, a visit timed within the months December to January ('short' rains) or possibly April to May ('long' rains) seems to coincide with the optimum times.

Friedmann's Lark usually makes its appearance once the rains start falling but even this doesn't seem to be 100% guaranteed in the same localities every season. Nonetheless, when the species is present it is often reasonably numerous and probably not easy to miss, provided its most distinctive song is known. One should listen out at any time of day (or night) for a single, long drawn-out and far-carrying *boo-ee-oo* with an emphasis on the middle part. This simple phrase is monotonously repeated at intervals of one to two seconds, either from a conspicuous perch or in an undulating but rather lazy song flight that reaches up to a height of *c.* 10 m.

No other smaller lark in range sings like this; Singing Bush Lark *M. cantillans*, Williams's Lark

M. williamsi, Flappet Lark *M. rufocinnamomea*, Foxy Lark *M. alopex* and Somali Short-toed Lark *Calandrella somalica* all give more complex or variable scratchy, warbling or melodious songs. The distinctive Short-tailed Lark *Pseudalaemon fremantlii* sings a slow, deliberate, but slightly slurred whistle from the ground *seeu seeu . . . seeu seeu seeu . . . seeu seeu TEWleu*. Perhaps the song of Friedmann's Lark might be overlooked as coming from a White-browed Scrub Robin *Cercotrichas leucophrys*, although this is rather unlikely.

Having heard the song the bird shouldn't be difficult to locate, as it is by no means a 'skulker' when singing or displaying. Check the tops of the bushes for a typical *Mirafra* lark that will be slightly raising its crown feathers and puffing out its pure white throat with every song phrase. This prominent white throat extends in a half-collar around the neck, immediately giving the bird a most distinctive appearance totally unlike its congeners (Figs. 1–2).

Perhaps the real mystery is to where this species goes when it is not breeding and vocal. There is some evidence to suggest that Friedmann's Lark is a local or intra-African migrant (for example, the appearances at Ngulia Lodge at night), but if this is the case exactly where are the non-breeding areas that it migrates to and from? Perhaps part of the problem lies in identifying the bird using plumage alone and if faced with a silent lark in north-east Africa what features should be looked for?

The larks in the genus *Mirafra* range in size from small to large with short, rounded wings, and variably shaped bills that can be short and conical or long and decurved. Friedmann's Lark is typical of the smaller, shorter billed types. Of the several comparable *Mirafra* larks, White-tailed Lark *M. albicauda* occurs in dense grasslands on black cotton soils, probably a habitat not suited to Friedmann's, and *albicauda* also appears blackish from a distance and so can be immediately rejected as a confusion species. The similar looking Flappet Lark *M. rufocinnamomea*, unlike Friedmann's, lacks any white in the tail, although the buff or rufous outer tail feathers can be confusingly pale in some populations. The localised Williams's Lark *M. williamsi* prefers more open, rocky, lava or sandy plains, is virtually plain-backed and blotched or spotted below, and again unlikely to be confused. The distinctive facial pattern of Somali Short-toed Lark *Calandrella somalica* with

its obvious pale semicircular areas around the eye and browner flight feathers should also be enough to immediately discount this species.

We are therefore left with two widespread and common species that perhaps offer the greatest challenge to correct identification. A Foxy Lark *M. alopex* was recently misidentified as Friedmann's Lark: see the photograph in *Bull. ABC* 16: 234, reproduced here (Fig. 3). Comparing this bird with Friedmann's Lark, we should note that the general coloration of Foxy Lark shows greater contrast, being generally warmer and much more rufous. This is particularly noticeable on the edges of the primaries, which form an obvious reddish panel on the closed wing. The pale-fringed greater and median coverts of Foxy Lark are dark-centred, whereas in Friedmann's Lark these feathers are brown-centred with a darker submarginal line. The white supercilium and semicircular mark below the eye are whiter and more prominent on Foxy Lark, which effect is heightened by the blackish lores. An encounter with the little-known rufous morph of Friedmann's Lark may be more problematic but this form should show an even more uniform appearance with the white areas washed warm buff.

Singing Bush Lark *M. cantillans* is somewhat more similar in plumage tone to Friedmann's and is perhaps the most likely confusion species. However, it is always a colder, greyer looking bird and completely lacks the rufous fringes to the flight feathers (Lack 1992, Zimmerman *et al.* 1996). The central rectrices of Friedmann's are also reddish-brown as opposed to cold grey or sepia brown in the appropriate race, *marginata*,

of Singing Bush Lark. Another feature seemingly unique to Friedmann's is that the streaks on the breast-sides tend to coalesce, giving the illusion of a dark patch somewhat akin to that often seen on short-toed larks *Calandrella* spp.

With increased understanding of the field features, perhaps it will not be too long before the final mysteries of this little-known bird are finally unravelled.

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